

Charles R. Sherman

Pioneer Lawyer and Judge of the Ohio Supreme Court

Charles Robert Sherman, known to many as the father of the famous Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman and U.S. Senator John Sherman, was a man of distinction in his own right. Had he not died at the early age of forty, he would have surely attained national prominence.

In 1810 at the age of twenty-one, Charles Sherman came to Ohio from Norwalk, Connecticut, originally heading to the Firelands in Northern Ohio. He had graduated from Dartmouth College and had recently been admitted to the bar in Connecticut, becoming a sixth generation lawyer. The Firelands, which now are Huron and Erie Counties, were 500,000 acres of land that Connecticut claimed by royal charter and had reserved for their citizens who had been burned out or suffered under the British during the Revolutionary War. Charles' father, Judge Taylor Sherman, had been appointed in 1805 as commissioner to survey and apportion this land. After making several trips to Ohio, he acquired two tracts of land for himself. In the summer of 1810 he sent his son Charles to Ohio to determine what opportunities were possible.

Leaving his new bride Mary Hoyt behind, Charles set off for Ohio. As he approached his destination he learned that the Indians were on the warpath in northern Ohio and the Shawnee Chief Tecumseh was organizing the tribes to resist the settlers moving onto their land. Being wary, Charles turned south and traveled Zane's Trace to Lancaster. Finding the town impressive and assured there would be sufficient legal work to sustain a family on the Ohio frontier, he returned to Connecticut. The following spring of 1811, Charles, Mary, and infant son, Charles, made the arduous six-week journey to Lancaster on horseback, accompanying a wagon train. They set up housekeeping in a little four-room house half way up the hill from the center of town. This little house later grew to an eight-room home to shelter the ten more children who would eventually be born there.

No sooner had the small family settled in than the War of 1812 took precedence over Charles' law practice. At an Ohio Militia recruitment meeting in Lancaster, Charles, who had been elected Major, served as recruiting officer. As such, he delivered a stirring speech which began, "Fellow soldiers, the crisis has arrived in which your country calls upon you, her constitutional guardians, to rally round her standard and to defend her rights and liberties." Fifty years later his son William Tecumseh would profess the same convictions as he fought to defend the constitution of his country in the Civil War. It would seem as if he was answering his father's call.

Although the war was not over, peace came to the frontier by the decisive victory in 1813 of General William Henry Harrison at the Battle of the Thames in Canada. The great Shawnee Chief Tecumseh was killed in this battle. He and 1,200 warriors had joined the British fight and although he was now a determined warrior against the encroaching settlers, he was respected as a humanitarian and for some time had been the hope of the white settlers as he had tried to remain on the Indian land in a peaceful manner. Seven years later, Charles Sherman would name a son after Tecumseh, declaring him "a great warrior."

Charles turned back to his law practice and actively sought a presidential appointment as an Internal Revenue Collector. On November 9, 1813, President James Madison appointed him Collector for the Third District of Ohio. The appointment proved to be financially disastrous. United States Bank currency was scarce on the frontier and most of the money used was issued by local banks. It varied in value, depending on location and was never stable. In April 1816, the Federal Government passed a resolution stating that after February 1817, only United States Bank notes or gold would be

accepted for payment of obligations to the Government. Although there was a ten-month period before the resolution took effect, it immediately greatly devalued the local bank currency. Charles had six deputies collecting under him, and they all had accepted local notes, which then became worthless. Instead of refusing the local notes, Charles assumed the burden of his deputies, and took on a great debt to the Federal Government which he would shoulder the rest of his life.

He then began to practice law on the Circuit Court, nicknamed the "Stirrup Court" as more time was spent in the saddle than in the court. Good friend and lawyer Thomas Ewing, who he had encouraged to settle in Lancaster, often joined him. They traveled by horseback accompanying other lawyers and the Supreme Court Judges to try the cases that awaited them throughout the district. There was great camaraderie among them and Charles was known to be gregarious and outgoing. The Supreme Court Judges were required to visit each county in their district once a year, and this made the circuit trips as long as two or three months. In 1823 the Ohio Legislature elected Charles Sherman Judge of the Ohio Supreme Court. While holding court in Lebanon, Ohio in June 1829, he fell ill and died six days later at the Golden Lamb Inn. He left his wife, Mary, and eleven children in bad financial straits, but he was rich in friends and family and they came to the rescue. Several of his children were raised by family and friends. Thomas Ewing raised William Tecumseh who would later marry his daughter, Ellen.

Charles Sherman was well known for his legal integrity. In Judge Moses M. Granger's 1872 review of Judge Sherman's legal opinions, he wrote "not one has ever been overruled," and "he possessed a legal ability and acumen of a very high grade, his grasp of legal principles was firm, his reasoning clear and his logic precise," and "Judge Charles R. Sherman must ever hold a high place among the Supreme Judges of Ohio."